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ABSTRACT

Three classroom activities that can help students become better writers by building on skills they already have as well as by providing them with necessary strategies are conferences, journals, and class discussions. Conference groups--made up of three to five students discussing rough drafts of each other's written work and recorded by tape or notetaking--allow students to use their oral communication skills to become better critical readers and writers. Student journals--written records of experiences both in and out of class--allow students to explore ideas, observations, conversations, and issues drawn from oral experiences and serve as the basis for additional written assignments. Class discussions--drawn from newspaper articles, books, song lyrics, or any issue introduced in class--can serve as a stimulus for written composition by providing information and generating interest in a topic. These three methods allow students to use oral communication skills as a way of responding to and analyzing written work, generating ideas for writing, and exploring issues and topics. (EL)

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ENCOURAGING, BUILDING ON, AND INTEGRATING ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS: PRACTICAL TECHNIQUES

Joyce Malek

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CS 209 406

ENCOURAGING, BUILDING ON, AND INTEGRATING ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS: PRACTICAL TECHNIQUES

Most of our students are adept at using oral communication skills. They engage comfortably in interpersonal communications, and are relaxed speaking to their peers and others. But in the reader to writer interaction, many students literally feel at a loss for words; they may be fearful or anxious about writing tasks and unskilled at offering criticism to others about written works. Our students may not realize that when a reader engages with the written word, the reader does not have the advantage of seeing the writer's uses of gestures, facial expressions, and body movements, or hearing the writer's vocal changes in order to understand what the writer wants to convey.

To compensate for this lack of information, we try to encourage our students to rely on and use composition skills to write what they want to say. We encourage our students to add more detail, to explain ideas, to describe and eliminate unimportant details: to flush out and to fill in. At the same time, and depending on the degree of formality of the written assignment, we also discourage our students from using slang, jargon, incomplete sentences, and other language uses more common to the spoken than the written word. It is not surprising that our students may feel that composition

techniques and composition coursework is something imposed on them and something over which they have little control.

But when students realize that their oral communication skills can be important tools for shaping their written skills, their anxiety levels decrease, and they are more willing to take risks and move forward with their writing.

Three techniques that have worked for me and other composition instructors in helping students feel more confident and less anxious about their writing tasks are conference groups, journal writing, and in-class discussions. These techniques build on skills students are already familiar and comfortable with and serve as transitions from oral to more formal written discourse. Conferences, journal writing, and in-class discussions also allow instructors to act as facillitators in the learning process and put the students back in control of their learning experiences.

CONFERENCE GROUPS

Conference groups are made up of three to five students who meet to discuss rough drafts of each others' written work. The groups are small enough to allow each student equal time to give and receive feedback on his or her work.

Prior to the conference group meeting, the students exchange rough drafts of the assignment, read them, and

list questions, suggestions and comments on the papers. Each author also prepares questions about places in the paper he or she wants the group to pay particular attention to. The instructor is free to choose whether or not to receive rough drafts or to write comments on them. In the first and sometimes second round of conference meetings, the students may look to the instuctor for comments or for the final word on suggestions that have been offered by fellow group members. It may also be difficult for the instuctor to keep from dominating the discussion. To prevent these problems, the instructor can experiment with not reading drafts and instead acting as notetaker and timekeeper for the group. This frees up the instructor to guide comments and suggestions. It also helps the students to realize that their feedback is valuable and insightful and that conference time is their time.

As in most group situations, members need time to get to know one another in order to feel confident about the kinds of things they can say to each other. Often students have never critically examined a classmate's work and do not know or are uncomfortable with offering feedback. The first critical responses can range from I liked this paper to I really liked this paper. At this point, the instructor can guide the critique by asking questions designed to stimulate students to respond as readers. The instructor can ask, where did this paper

first get your attention; was there a concrete description there, did the tone of the paper change, or was there a name or a clear image presented; where are some other places that the paper can be made stronger by adding attention holding details like the ones we have discussed. By answering these questions and others like them, students learn to look for specific places in the text that perked them up or put them to sleep and they learn to analyze why their attention was aroused. The author is also free to ask questions or to respond to comments. The instructor can record comments from the group members on the back of the rough drafts and return the drafts to each writer. Each group member also returns drafts to the other members with individual written suggestions and feedback. So in addition to hearing comments, the student group member also has a written record of those comments.

A variation on written notetaking is taperecording conference group meetings. Each student supplies a cassette and the instructor is in charge of recording the group's comments. Students may elect not to erase or record over comments from earlier conference meetings so that they can compare them with comments received in later meetings.

Conferences help students develop a critical eye toward their own work. They also develop a sense of audience by seeing and hearing first hand how their

writing affects different readers. Conferences allow students to use their oral communication skills to become better critical readers and writers. Another strategy that draws on audience awareness and can be used in tandem with conference and class work is journal writing.

JOURNALS

Journals function as a type of "talking book." The language used in journals is usually more formal than spoken language, but less formal than the language students use in writing papers. Students use journals to write about experiences they have both in and outside of class. Journals may be used to examine and analyze events students may have heard or read about through the media or to write about the things that affect them in their everyday lives. Instructors can have students keep course journals that focus primarily on assigned readings and writings, and on the discussions that take place in class and in conference groups.

The type of comments given to students in their journals or about their journal writings is critical to the students' willingness to use their journals. Comments centering on supporting the students' choices of topics and encouraging them to continue exploring issues they are already writing about can be most effective. The instructor can also offer suggestions

that direct students to other sources for more information about their topics. Some students might want the instuctor to pay particular attention to spelling and grammatical errors, while other students will not want any comments or suggestions on their journals, or they may want them only on a separate sheet of paper. The instructor's sensitivity to the students' needs can encourage or discourage students' willingness to use journals and their willingness to interact with the instructor.

The journal as "talking book" is apparent in the students' awareness of audience. Often that audience is the instructor if the instructor is reading the journals. Instructors may feel as if they are entering into a type of dialogue when reading their students' journals; statements are directed at the instructors and they may find themselves nodding, shrugging their shoulders and responding as if they are having conversations with their students.

The students' oral communication skills are reflected in the manner in which they engage instructors in responding to their words, the casualness of the language used and topic choices. Journals allow students to explore ideas, observations, conversations and issues that are drawn primarilay from their oral experiences. Journals may also contain the first thoughts about an issue that will later form a written assignment, and so

serve to interface the oral with written discourse.

CLASS DISCUSSIONS

One way to stimulate journal writing and paper topics is by holding regular class discussions. Students can bring in newspaper articles, passages from books that particularly affected them, song lyrics and other written articles that can be copied and distributed to class members. Class discussions can also center around several issues that the instructor or students can introduce for the purpose of exploring similarities or differences between topics and between each others' attitudes and beliefs.

The structure of the class during discussions is important in allowing for a comfortable and free exchange of ideas. Circles work well because students can see each other and recognize when a classmate has finished speaking or wants to continue or when another student wants the floor. A circle also allows each member to feel more equal; no one is at the head or the back of the class. The instructor might want to take a different seat for each discussion session so that the students don't designate the instructor and other students sitting next to the instructor as the front of the class, and as the authorities on the topics.

Classroom discussions can be run several ways. Each student can raise his or hand and is then recognized by the previous speaker in order to have the floor. Another

way of holding discussions is to have students take turns going around the circle and saying something about the topic under discussion without interruption. After the circle is completed and each member has had his or her say, the topic can be opened for a more free-form discussion. Both of these techniques work well; although, the second takes a bit more time. Discussions in which the students talk without raising their hands and without first going around the circle are more common and probably more familiar to the students.

Instructors can ask students to write about the discusions in their journals or to write summaries of what was talked about. But often students will use their journals to talk about and respond to issues raised during discussions without prompting from instructors. Like journals, class discussions can also lead to paper topics. In one recent freshman composition class, we were discussing an alleged sexual assault that took place on campus. The discussion about the assault led to a discussion about dorm safety and women's fears of harrassment and their fears for their personal safety both on and off the campus. Many of the students in this class chose to write about this discussion in their journals. One of the men wrote that he hadn't given much thought previous to the discussion as to how women feel when they are verbally harrassed, and that he now had a different perspective. He wrote that he would stop

verbally harrassing women and that he would talk to his male friends about this issue.

One of the women in the class used that discussion to form her paper about her fears of sexual assault and to explore escort services and support groups for women on campus. Both students beautifully integrated the oral discussion with their choice of written discourse. Both wrote about a topic that they hadn't explored in detail before, but most important, they came away with valuable information that enabled them to take steps toward change.

Conferences, journals, and class discussions work because they let students use oral communication skills as a way of responding to and analyzing written work, generating ideas for writing, and exploring issues and topics. These techniques empower students by building on skills they already have and by providing them with ways of using those skills to become better writers. These strategies allow instructors to become facilitators in the learning process and free students to take responsibilities for their learning experiences.

Joyce Malek

References

Peter Elbow, Writing with Power (Oxford:Oxford University Press,1981) Pages 240 through 263 are particularly useful to instructors and students when offering comments and feedback on written work during conference group sesseions. Elbow's Reader-Based and Criterion-Based questions serve nicely as a way of getting at and going beyond structural problems to problems of tone, voice, believability, and sincerity.

Linda Flower, Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing (New York:Harcourt Brace Jovanovich,Inc.,1981) Chapter Ten discusses strategies for transforming "Writer-Based Prose into Reader-Based Prose" by focusing on readers' needs. Flower encourages writers to analyze their audience and anticipate readers' responses.

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